



Gender, Customs, and Colonial Experience: Re-examining Power in Things Fall Apart by Achebe

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ABSTRACT

The research analyzes gender political systems in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958) through its analysis of how pre-colonial Igbo society and colonial and missionary activities affected gender role development. The novel by Achebe presents a detailed study of masculine and feminine characteristics, which demonstrates how society creates patterns for people to develop their identities and attain social positions and power, and fight against oppression. The research shows that Achebe presents gender as a flexible system of social behaviors, which people use to achieve their goals while facing the challenges of aging and their family background and colonial domination. The research uses feminist and postcolonial theories to prove that strict gender roles maintain social unity. They lead to personal suffering. The research paper analyzes Achebe's opposition to male-dominated systems, while it also studies how women gained power in those systems.

Introduction

Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart tells the story of Okonkwo who stands as a respected warrior and important leader within the imaginary village of Umuofia which belongs to the Igbo community. The story tracks Okonkwo's ascent to power which ends in his complete collapse because he battles his own doubts while facing the massive changes that British colonizers and Christian missionaries brought to his



society. The novel achieved its status as a fundamental work of African literature because Chinua Achebe published it first in 1958 to show readers the authentic culture of Igbo society before colonial times. Achebe constructs an accurate portrayal of Igbo society through his detailed depiction of their social structures together with their political systems and religious practices which existed before colonial powers arrived. The story receives most of its scholarly attention for its depiction of colonial impact on indigenous people and their traditional customs and their conflicts with Western institutional frameworks. The novel shows how men and women interact with each other in their relationships. The analysis of gender politics reveals the core social arrangements together with the existing conflicts which shape Igbo community life according to Achebe (1958/2008) and Nfah-Abbenyi (1997).

Societies establish gender politics through their systems which assign social responsibilities and control power distribution and determine who can reach positions of authority and obtain material assets based on their cultural definitions of male and female roles. Judith Butler along with other scholars show that people must perform social behaviors to create their gender identity because this identity exists beyond biological definitions (Butler, 1990). Oyeronke Oyewumi and Helen Callaway have developed the field of African literary and cultural studies through their work which shows that African gender relations need to be studied within their native cultural backgrounds instead of Western analytical methods (Oyewumi, 1997; Callaway, 1987). Traditional communities including the Igbo society from the novel base their gender expectations on how people maintain their social rank and their ability to work for money and their family ties and their duties to their community.

Against this background, the present paper examines how Achebe represents gender roles and relations in *Things Fall Apart*. The research investigates how the novel builds masculine and feminine identities which show how power operates in Igbo culture. People face different ways to handle their assigned gender roles when society experiences major shifts which include colonial rule and cultural breakdowns. The analysis studies three core elements which link together to form gender politics in the text to answer these questions. The text presents first the ways people develop their understanding of male and female identities through cultural learning. The text shows how people work to achieve gender equality through their interactions with family units and religious organizations and political organizations. The community faces changes in its established gender roles because of colonial expansion and the process of social transformation.

1. Gender and Social Structure in Igbo Society

1.1 Masculinity and the Ideals of Strength



The novel *Things Fall Apart* depicts masculine identity through physical power and courageous behavior and aggressive actions which lead to social recognition among the Igbo people. The novel presents a world where society judges men based on their accomplishments in farming and their success in military battles and their ability to command others. Okonkwo serves as the main character who shows the complete picture of masculinity which exists in the story. He becomes respected because he achieves victory as a wrestler and as a warrior and he builds a successful yam farming business. His strong desire to prove his masculinity stems from his deep fear of turning into his father Unoka. The local people remember Unoka as a kind person who never succeeded in making money or earning any official positions. Because of this, Okonkwo views his father as weak and effeminate, and he dedicates his life to becoming the exact opposite. The main character creates his entire personality through his need to avoid his father Unoka's disgrace which influences everything he does (Achebe, 1958/2008).

R.W. Connell describes Okonkwo's strict determination to show strength and command others through his concept of hegemonic masculinity which represents the perfect male standard that supports dominance and emotional suppression and control of women and weaker men (Connell, 1995). The system requires people to perform masculine actions which include showing physical strength and taking control of situations. Okonkwo hides his tender emotions because he thinks showing compassion will make him look like a weak person. The man uses his family members including his wives and children as targets for his violent outbursts because he wants to protect the male authority which he dedicated his life to building.

Okonkwo demonstrates his masculine values through his relationship with his son Nwoye according to the established masculine expectations. Okonkwo expresses his disappointment through Nwoye because his son shows delicate emotional responses which Okonkwo views as female behavior and weak conduct. According to Achebe in his 1958/2008 work (p. 32) Okonkwo became justifiably angry when his son spent time idle and showed signs of effeminate behavior. The people respond through their actions because society uses strict gender rules to enforce both cultural values and systems which punish those who do not follow them. The social system treats men who stray from regular masculine behavior through public criticism and social exclusion and physical assault.

1.2 Femininity and Social Standing

The way *Things Fall Apart* shows femininity depends on how men view women and on the social systems which control family relationships and community organization in Igbo society. Women usually connect with the concepts of fertility and nurturing and caregiving and domestic duties. Their social roles



include household maintenance and child upbringing and food preparation and specific crop cultivation on their family farm. The community depends on these tasks for its economic and social stability according to the research of Onookome Okome and other scholars (Okagbue, 2010). The novel shows Chinua Achebe treating these duties as essential work which helps the Igbo people survive instead of proving any natural deficiency in women. Women perform essential work which maintains home economics while they raise children to become future community members which proves their roles go beyond simple support roles.

Achebe shows how Igbo society organizes itself through gender by linking male and female roles to different types of agricultural work. The community views yams as their most important agricultural product which they call the "king of crops" while they assign male characteristics to yams because growing them demands physical strength and extended time and dangerous conditions. Men who succeed at growing yams will earn both social respect and community admiration. The feminine designation applies to cocoyams and beans and vegetables because women usually grow them for basic food needs instead of gaining social standing. The metaphors in Achebe's work demonstrate how society views male and female roles through its assignment of worth to various work activities. Men receive social status from their activities but women perform vital tasks which society fails to recognize.

The story shows that women create areas of power which exist alongside the dominant patriarchal cultural system. The priestess Chielo who serves as the Oracle of Agbala stands as a powerful example. Chielo commands deep respect within the community because of her spiritual role. The story shows Ezinma getting carried by her mother to a sacred forest where they perform an oracle consultation ritual. The time period shows how people with absolute power decide to stay away from challenging her position. The show demonstrates how women lack power in their everyday social circles yet spiritual and cultural institutions provide them with major authority. The author shows through his work that Igbo society contains various elements which make up its gender relationship system.

2. Institutions, Power, and Gendered Authority

2.1 Family and Patriarchy

The story of *Things Fall Apart* uses family life as its main stage to show how gender relations operate through their most essential form. The household operates as a small representation of Igbo society because it shows how the community follows its cultural rules and power systems. The family system consists of fathers who maintain official leadership positions while mothers take charge of creating



peaceful environments which protect their family members. Okonkwo controls his family through his patriarchal authority which makes him the dominant figure in their home. The man uses his strict views about manhood to impose severe punishments on his wives and children while he ignores their need for emotional support and their right to express themselves.

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2.2 Gendered Rituals and Religion

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3. Gender, Colonialism, and Narrative Power

3.1 The Impact of Colonization on Gender Structures

The story of *Things Fall Apart* uses family life as its main stage to show how gender relations operate through their most essential form. The household operates as a small representation of Igbo society because it shows how the community follows its cultural rules and power systems. The family system consists of fathers who maintain official leadership positions while mothers take charge of creating peaceful environments which protect their family members. Okonkwo controls his family through his patriarchal authority which makes him the dominant figure in their home. The man uses his strict views about manhood to impose severe punishments on his wives and children while he ignores their need for emotional support and their right to express themselves.

A clear example of how this shift has occurred can be seen in how Chielo (the priestess who functioned as a highly respected intermediary between the gods and humanity) has lost her authority due to the increasing power of Christian missionaries; with the growth of Christian influence, male church leaders are becoming increasingly associated with spiritual authority and as the primary base of religious authority, rather than women or indigenous institutions of religious authority. In addition, this change does not just represent a change in religious practice or belief, but rather is also indicative of a reshaping of gender based power within the society. In this regard, William Mazzarella has argued that colonialism restructures indigenous gender-based systems because it imposes Western, patriarchal models on top of existing female forms of authority, thus creating an erosion of female sources of authority (Mazzarella, 2004).

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3.2 Gendered Resistance and Adaptation

In *Things Fall Apart*, gender has an impact on the ways in which individuals react to colonial intrusion, but not in a uniform fashion. Achebe illustrates how women are responding to changes in their social order in ways that may not be "loud" or overt, but are still very impactful. For example, characters such as Ekwefi and Ezinma show how resilient women can be in the face of the uncertainty introduced by the colonizers. While neither character challenges colonial authority directly, both women use care, support and the performance of daily tasks to create a sense of solidarity and emotional well-being within their family. Ekwefi's devotion to her daughter Ezinma, as well as Ezinma's intelligence and sensitivity, provide a sense of cohesion to the household during times of instability. Thus, these characters illustrate a quieter form of agency that is often overlooked when analysing the text through the lens of male characters, such as Okonkwo.

Achebe also critiques the impact of colonial institutions on gender dynamics. In particular, the model of religious leadership introduced by Christian missionaries has shifted the authority of religious leadership toward men, thereby diminishing the traditional role of women as spiritual leaders in the community. The novel does not depict the pre-colonial society as a place of equilibrium or equality but rather illustrates how both the Traditional Igbo social structure and colonial social structure establish rigid standards for masculinity and femininity. This balanced portrayal reveals how individuals from different cultures may experience limitations on their freedom when gender roles are interpreted in an overly prescriptive manner.

4. Critical Perspectives on Gender in *Things Fall Apart*

4.1 Feminist Critiques

There is ongoing debate among feminist scholars around the many different ways in which *Things Fall Apart* can be read, as some feminist scholars have read the text as being pro-patriarchal while others see it as being anti-patriarchal. The book shows a male-dominated society where men have political power, but many scholars argue that Achebe also shows the positive resilience of women within the patriarchal structures in place. For example, one scholar, Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, argues that the representation of women in the book demonstrates both marginalization and strength in a gendered society (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997). Furthermore, female characters such as Ekwefi and Ezinma show examples of emotional resilience and adaptability; therefore, although women have little formal authority in these societies, they have other forms of power. The multiple and contrasting representations of



women in the novel demonstrate how gender politics operate through domination, resistance, and negotiation, rather than solely through a hierarchical relationship of power.

In a similar vein, sociologist Oyeronke Oyewumi has challenged the assumption of Western feminists that all societies experience patriarchy in an identical manner (Oyěwùmí 1997). She believes that gender categories and power relations are culturally specific and should be understood in their respective historical settings. When this perspective is applied to Achebe's novel, it will be shown that Igbo gender relations can not be entirely explained using Western templates of oppression and liberation. Instead, it is demonstrated that there is a more complicated socio-cultural system at play within the context of the novel and that gender role, authority, and identity come from local traditions, beliefs, and community obligations.

4.2 Postcolonial Readings

Postcolonial theorists often point out the way in which the colonial discourse influences existing social structures of which one example is the way in which the colonial discourse shapes the gender relations within a particular culture. In Chinua Achebe's book "Things Fall Apart", we see that the traditional Igbo community is faced with the arrival of both the British Colonial Government and the missionaries, making the influence of the British governmental system and the Church on traditional Igbo culture visible. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin have all argued that postcolonial literature is important in dismantling the simplistic and stereotypical representations of African societies (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2002) by demonstrating the internal diversity and complexity of the social institutions of the Igbo people, including the gender arrangements within Igbo culture.

In this work of fiction, the author compares indigenous views of gender with the images that were created from European colonialism. Igbo culture maintained specific distinct gender roles; however, it also provided for some possibilities for women to have authority, particularly in matters of a spiritual and domestic nature. With the introduction of colonialism, the structures began to evolve; for example, the teachings of Christian missionaries tended to value male authority and redefine spiritual authority in a manner that disrespected and even marginalized existing indigenous practices. In this way, Achebe demonstrates that colonialism was not only an exercise of political power but also a vehicle by which colonizing nations reshape the way that their colonies view themselves in terms of gender and power.

Achebe is clear in showing that traditional gender roles were always subject to negotiation and, at the same time, that the colonial experience created an environment where the negotiation of gender was more



evident than ever before. In other words, the colonial experience served to create an area of cultural conflict and change with respect to gender.

5. Discussion

The novel "Things Fall Apart" by Chinua Achebe illustrates that gender politics are ingrained in the culture, religion and sociopolitical structures of the Igbo people. In this work of fiction, masculinity is defined by traits related to the concept of strength, aggression, honour and achieving social status. Examples of these types of accomplishments for men are through being successful farmers, warriors and holding titles. On the other hand, femininity is defined mostly by traits attached to women giving birth, raising children, providing stability at home, preparing for rituals and offering emotional support to their families. These social constructs create the visible binary system of gender and will ultimately define how both men and women will behave and identify themselves. Achebe does present these constructs in a complex way, indicating that there are multiple influences from different perspectives on the creation and maintenance of gender roles and that these include spirituality, colonial influence, and individual choice.

The gender dynamics present in this novel depict systems of power that contribute to the stability of the community while simultaneously restricting the freedom of individuals. The tragic demise of Okonkwo embodies both this tension and its embodied impact. Okonkwo's rigid adherence to an idealized version of masculinity prevents him from adapting to the changes brought on by colonization and cultural shifts. This inability to reconcile his identity with these rapidly evolving realities ultimately represents a large part of his demise.

Despite these limitations, the female characters in this novel exemplify resilience within them. For example, female characters navigate gendered spatial environments with patience and emotional fortitude while maintaining family ties and community connectivity. Through the representation of both male institutional power as well as the subtle influence of women, Achebe avoids oversimplifying the condemnation of patriarchy. This narrative illustrates an intricate and richly textured society where changes in historical conditions affect the nature and evolution of gender relations. In providing such a nuanced view of African gender relations, Achebe encourages readers to reevaluate their preconceptions regarding African gender relations, as well as acknowledge the various strategies employed by men and women for adaptation and resistance.



Conclusion

Chinua Achebe reveals to the reader through his detailed depiction of community life in the novel "Things Fall Apart" how the power, culture, and identity of an entire group of people or ethnic group can be determined by one's gender. By showing this through many examples, Achebe demonstrates that gender roles are not natural, nor are they fixed; they are created and modified by social institutions, cultural expectations, and historical circumstances. As colonial forces enter the Igbo community, they disrupt these gender roles as a result of their presence and alter the way individuals in the Igbo community view themselves with regard to gender.

This analysis shows that Achebe views gender as not only a rigid framework through which people view authority, identity, and community but also as a flexible structure that can be adapted to fit the current status of an individual's relationship to their cultural and political environment. Consequently, the characters within "Things Fall Apart" are constantly negotiating their position in a rapidly changing cultural and political environment. Achebe's emphasis on the limitations and opportunities presented by traditional gender roles provides readers with a richer understanding of the diversity of African communities and the major social changes that were caused by the impact of colonialism.

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